



Discipline in Children's Ministry



**Written by Melissa Cellier for
Back to Basics 2007**

**Children's Ministry Training Day
for the Resource Centre for
Children's and Family Ministry,
Uniting Church in SA**

DISCIPLINE IN CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

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'Discipline' is one of the most frequently mentioned concerns of people in ministry with children. In response to that concern, this paper was first presented at *Back to Basics '07* — the annual Children's Ministry Training Day of the Resource Centre for Children's and Family Ministry, Uniting Church in SA.

The paper, which this handout accompanies, is available for children's ministry leaders to use in training their own teams.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

A. DEFINITION OF DISCIPLINE

When you hear the word discipline what do you think of?

How might you define the word discipline?



- The root word of discipline means ‘to disciple’ which is to teach, instruct, train or to learn.
- “Discipline is not a negative word. It involves guiding a child from infancy to adulthood. The goal of discipline is for the child to reach a level of maturity that will allow the child one day to function as a responsible adult in society – which is a positive goal! To train a child in mind and character to become a self-controlled and constructive member of home and community requires that you use guidance by example, modelling, verbal instruction, written request, teaching and preaching right behaviour, correcting wrong behaviour, providing learning experiences and much more. Punishment is also one of these means and does have its place, but in most cases punishment is greatly overused. Discipline and punishment are not synonymous and discipline does not mean punishment. Punishment is a type of discipline though the most negative type.” (Chapman and Campbell, p111-112)
- Discipline should be a positive process rather than a negative battle. Discipline should not be confused with control. Discipline focuses on the learner, while control emphasises the teacher. (*Tool Box: resource manual for children’s work*, p 43)
- “Discipline is a positive way of solving conflicts, employing mutual respect for all parties involved. When discipline is done correctly, it shows lovingly what was done wrong, gives the child the responsibility for the problem, shows the child possible ways to solve the problem, and does not destroy the child’s self-esteem. A goal for educators is to instil a sense of self-discipline in the children we teach.” (Trafton O’Neal, p 35)

B. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DISCIPLINE

Why do we discipline?

How should we discipline when...

- we each have different standards for acceptable behaviour?
- we each have different methods that we believe are acceptable for disciplining children?
- we are trying to incorporate Christian love in discipline?
- we don't want to make church feel like school?
- we only have the children for a short time?

The best place to start when thinking about how to discipline is Christian love.

"We will discipline, in the context of love" *Children and the gospel* by Ron Buckland.

In-attention

"There is no such thing as an inattentive child."



Responding to challenges

"The behaviours and attitudes that we feel are creating discipline problems are points of pressure for us in ministry. They are moments when we are not in control, when our plans are not working, or when someone is pushing against our authority." (Buckland, p 146)

How we respond to discipline challenges is crucial to our ministry because:

- we are modelling how to respond under pressure
- the child's self esteem is in our hands.
- children in primary age have a highly developed sense of fairness and they will get upset if they feel someone is being treated unfairly.

C. CAUSES OF MISBEHAVIOUR

Write a list of as many **causes of misbehaviour** that you can think of.

In the book *The Five Love Languages of Children* (Chapman and Campbell) it is suggested that the

“main cause of misbehaviour is

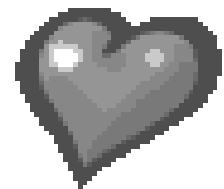
The Big Questions

When a child misbehaves we need to ask ourselves:

“What does my child need when he/she misbehaves?”

and not

“What can I do to correct his/her behaviour?” The logical answer to this is punishment.



What does this child need?

“Does this child need his/her love tank filled?”

“Is this a physical problem such as pain, hunger or thirst, fatigue or illness?”

“Is there an issue with the child, the classroom atmosphere or in the teacher’s attitude?”

In the student:

- Does the student have difficulty reading with his/her age group?
- Has the student been unsuccessful in previous school settings?
- Is the problem related to something happening in the family?
- Is the student using misbehaviour as an attention-getter because of a lack of positive attention in other areas of his/her life?
- Could the misbehaviour be related to poor listening skills, lack of study skills, or lack of interest in the material being learned?

In the classroom atmosphere:

- Is there lack of classroom organisation?
- How much opportunity is there for student interaction or responsibility?
- Does the student have a part in planning and setting goals?
- Are directions, goals, and assignments clear? For example, is it difficult for the student to hear you? Does the student understand the assignments? Was the lesson discussed thoroughly?
- Are supplies and equipment easy to locate and use?

In the teacher's attitude:

- Are you warm and friendly to all students?
- Are you consistent in expectations, rules, and requirements?
- Do you make fair and equal judgments when it is necessary to make a judgement?
- Are you even-tempered?
- Are you firm but fair?
- Do you have appropriate expectations for students at this age-level?

"Each student ... has an individual personality and a set of already learned behaviours... When mixed with different students, new experiences, a new teacher, different classroom rules and new material to learn, even children themselves may be surprised by the way they act and react... By adding together all the factors you help to ensure the behaviour that takes place within your classroom is the best it can be." (Trafton O'Neal, p35)



PART 2: CREATING A CLIMATE FOR POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

“Many behaviour problems will be avoided if your program captivates the children. Therefore, good preparation and presentation will form the basis of a good behaviour management strategy.” (*The Very Essential Guide to Working with Children* p22-23)

D. PREPARATION

Preparation begins long before your session. It includes your own spiritual care and growth and your own professional development.

- Never ever walk into a session unprepared.
- Know your children
- Know yourself
- Know the aims and objectives of the program
 - Aims are the long term goals for the children either for that term or year
 - Objectives are the learning you want the children to experience in that particular lesson. “What is the main concept I wish the students to learn in this lesson?”
- Prayer-paration

E. PLANNING

- Plan experiences that will make the learning meaningful and that are relevant to the children.
- Be interesting. Plan ways to make your sessions thought provoking and fun.
- Plan to use a variety of learning and teaching techniques.
- Plan to give children choices.
- Try out crafts, games and activities before the session and have all the materials gathered before the session.
- Plan a sequence of activities that is appropriate to the children’s schedule.
- Plan a regular routine.
- Plan as a team.
- Plan for children with special needs — whether they are hearing impaired, have limited reading ability or behavioural issues. An extra helper may be an answer.
- Plan for success. Plan activities that children can do successfully.

The ultimate success of your teaching — transforming the child’s life — is in God’s hands. Pray for it. Do your best. Then leave it to God.
- Plan ways for all the children to be actively involved in different aspects of the session.

Brainstorm at your table some of the different ways that children can be involved in telling the story, singing or prayer time.

Evaluation

Think of some questions that you could ask yourself regularly when planning, eg.:

- Is the routine working?
- What are the children enjoying? Why?
- What are they not enjoying? How can this be changed?

Take a moment to reflect on how you prepare. Write down one aspect of organisation that you would like to do better and write how you might accomplish that.

- How well prepared are you before the session? On the day?
- Do you have aims and objectives? How well are you working towards achieving them?
- How well do you know your children?
- Are you praying?
- Do you use a variety of teaching and learning techniques?
- Have you recently tried something new?
- Are children involved in different aspects of the session on a regular basis?
- Are you evaluating what you're doing?

F. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Physical environment needs:

- to be a safe place, a place where children want to be
- to be welcoming, interesting
- materials accessible & available, with items you want them to see at their eye level
- appropriate floor coverings
- child-sized tables and chairs
- a special area for storytelling
- to be a personalised space by displaying children's artwork
- few distractions



Share with a partner about how you currently create a welcoming physical environment. Identify and write down one thing that you can change to improve the physical environment.

G. YOU, THE TEACHER

You create a climate for positive behaviour by the way you interact with the children.

- **Relationships.** Build relationship. Get to know your children. Care about and accept all children. Smile often.
- **Respect.** Show respect and consideration towards the children.
- **Choice.** Give children choices and reasons whenever possible. Let them know that you think they are responsible, capable people who can make good choices and decisions based on what they know and who they are.
- **Humility.** Sit down with the children or bend down to their level, don't tower above them.
- **Consistency.** Be fair and consistent. If you let children behave one way this week and next week that behaviour is un-acceptable, they become confused.
- **Boundaries.** Set a standard and maintain it. Have definite limits for behaviour.
- **Expectations.** Let the children know what your expectations are for them. Remember, your children tend to live up (or down!) to our expectations.
- **Attention.** It's important all children get positive attention.
- **Language.** Take care in selecting words that your children can understand. Define or explain any words that you are not sure they understand. Talk *with* kids, not *to* them and don't talk down to them. Be conscious of the way your words can make a difference to a child's sense of self-worth.
- **Instructions.** Give clear, concise directions.
Break tasks into smaller parts. A simple rule of thumb is to not give more than three directions at one time.
Delay giving new instructions until the current one is completed. Always check that the children have understood the instructions.
- **Special needs.** Be aware of some of the unique needs of the children in your class and offer individual directions.
- **Teacher : child ratio.** Be aware of the number of leaders and the number of children.
Different organisations have different expectations but a helpful guide is that the age of the child determines the number of adults required, for example have one adult for every three three-year-olds or every ten, ten year olds.
There should always be two adults in every room, not including teenage assistants.

The New Model

The traditional model for Sunday School had the teacher at the top of a power hierarchy and children at the bottom.

Today we are working in a society where expectations of power have changed. The new model is more like a circle with values/vision in the centre and the children and teacher around in a circle.

Take a moment to reflect on what model of power you use.

PART 3: BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Discipline incidents and strategies

At your table brainstorm some of the “problems” or discipline incidents that you have had to deal with recently and share some strategies of “what works” in dealing with the negative behaviour while training children in a positive way.



H. RULES AND EXPECTATIONS

- Rules need to be clearly stated.
- Include children in deciding what rules the group will have.
- If you have any rules or expectations that you as a teacher absolutely have to have, explain these to your students. Have them repeat to you the rules or explain them in their own words so that you are sure everyone understands what you expect.
- Only have a few “don’t” rules –choose two or three things that you will not tolerate in the classroom, and then go from there.
- Anything that is unsafe or disruptive to the learning of another student should not be allowed.
- Turn some of the “don’ts” into “dos” eg. ‘Don’t run in the classroom’ becomes ‘Walk in the classroom.’
- You might include a couple of silly rules, just for fun!

Sample rules for a group of older children:

We have these rules to ensure that everyone can be safe and happy in our class:

1. We listen to whoever is talking
2. We show sensible and responsible behaviour
3. We respect other people and their property
4. We follow teacher instruction
5. We stay on task

It’s important to remind and restate the rules regularly, and to enforce these rules consistently.

I. ATTENTION GETTERS

- Signals where the teacher does an action until all children join in:
- Signals the teacher gives and then waits for full attention:
- Other techniques:
- Decide on recognised signals to be used for gaining children's attention and let children practice them.



J. MINOR DISTURBANCES

Try and keep the program flowing by:

- ignoring misbehaviour that does not disrupt the group and talk to the child concerned later.
- standing near the child
- establishing momentary eye contact
- pausing half way through a sentence and waiting until they look at you
- using a simple gesture
- removing distractions
- praising positive behaviour

Requests:

- are pleasant, positive ways of controlling behaviour.
- show that you respect the children's feelings and opinions and that their feelings and opinions matter.
- tell children that you expect them to take responsibility for their own behaviour.

Commands:

- are a negative means of control because you are telling a child what to do, "I simply expect you to do what I am saying."
- are more forceful.
- are often accompanied by negative nonverbal messages, such as harsher tones.

At your table come up with two phrases: one a request the other a command.

K. MAJOR DISTURBANCES

- Do not ignore intentional, attention-getting behaviour. Deal with the problem at once.
- Remember to look behind the presenting problem to consider the real reason for the negative behaviour. Use the questions we looked at earlier. What might this child need?
- Be flexible and prepared to change your program. Look for “teachable moments.”

3 steps when correcting a child:

- **Step1: Warning:** Give the child a simple yet clearly understood warning that their behaviour is unacceptable. If that behaviour continues –
- **Step 2: Private consultation:** Warn the child that if misbehaviour continues disciplinary action will occur, eg he will be taken home. Don’t threaten disciplinary action unless you are prepared to carry it through. If misbehaviour continues –
- **Step 3: Disciplinary action:** carried out.

Effective Correction: In private consultation:

- Deal with the child alone but make sure you are not out of sight.
- Share your feelings about the misbehaviour, not the child who is misbehaving.
- Let the child tell you what he did wrong. Ask “what are you doing?” and “what should you be doing?” Don’t ask why questions.
- Be sure the child understands why the behaviour is unacceptable.
- Outline the options available to the child. Place the responsibility for the child’s actions on his/her shoulders, not yours. Encourage him/her to make good choices.
- Explain a positive behaviour option for the child to choose, such as
High 5: *Ignore * Walk away * Talk friendly * Talk firmly * Report

Logical consequences

- Some repeated misbehaviours require a logical consequence, which means the consequence is tied directly to the misbehaviour.
- Get the children to determine the logical consequence –either when setting the rules or when discussing the misbehaviour. Involve the student in choosing the best alternative
- Follow through on it.

L. PUNISHMENT

- Punishment involves placing a negative element into the child’s environment as a consequence of misbehaviour.
- “The punishment must fit the crime.”
- “One size does not fit all.”
- We must be prepared to use it, and to use it appropriately and with care, by planning ahead and deciding appropriate punishments for various offences.

Discuss at your table when and what type of punishment may be appropriate in a ministry program.

M. BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

Behaviour modification uses:

- Positive reinforcement (such as placing a positive element into a child's environment):
 - social
 - tokens
 - activity
 - tangible
- Negative reinforcement (where you withdraw a positive element from the child's environment):
 - social
 - activity

Behaviour modification is helpful for specific, recurring, behavioural problems for which a child shows no remorse. It should be used sparingly.

Case studies:

Use the following case studies with the people at your table. How might you respond? What might you say?

1. Vincent has pinched some stickers and another child saw this happening and tells you. What could you do?
2. Maria starts to sing very loudly during the singing time and acting silly (much to the amusement of those around her). What could you do to respond to this situation?
3. Alex has been calling out continuously while you have been trying to tell a story. You have asked him to stop. He hasn't. What are three possible courses of action that you could take?
4. Jennie and Rebecca both want to use the purple texta and start to argue over it. What could you do to deal with this situation?
5. You ask Tony to pick up the scissors on the floor. He refuses. What could you do?
6. Tania has been tapping Matthew with her foot throughout the singing. He asked her to stop. She doesn't. He turns around and hits her. What could you do?



PART 4: CONCLUSION

O. ANALYSE YOUR DISCIPLINING STYLE

Analyse the origins for your disciplining style by answering the following questions:

- What were the primary methods my parents/teachers used to discipline me?

- What books have I read on discipline that have impacted my ideas about child discipline?

- What advice have I received from others that have influenced the way I discipline children?

Consider the merits of these ideas. Through feedback from others, take steps to work on more effective ways to discipline children in your ministry.

P. A CHILD'S REMORSE, AN ADULT'S FORGIVENESS

"If misbehaviour is not caused by physical problems then the next question is: "Does this child feel sorry for what he/she has done?" If the child is genuinely sorry for what he/she has done there is no need to proceed further. He/she has learned and repented; punishment now could be destructive. If the child is truly sorry and shows genuine remorse, you should rejoice. This means his/her conscience is alive and well."

"A healthy conscience is what controls a child's or adult's behaviour when he/she doesn't have to behave appropriately. Guilt is necessary for the development of a healthy conscience. When a child is genuinely sorry for his/her behaviour, instead of punishing him/her, forgive him/her. The love that flows from a child who has been forgiven is overwhelming. By forgiving him/her you are also modelling how to forgive so he/she will be able to forgive others as he/she grows."

(Chapman and Campbell, p118-119)



Q. OVERACTIVE CHILDREN

Overactive children take time and patience. Their behaviour is usually impulsive, disruptive, noisy and they seem to always need attention. These points should help you to work with active kids.

- Learn to understand each one individually. Talk to their parents and determine how they handle their behaviour.
- Provide good, active, busy programs so they are fully occupied all the time. Over active children find it hard to concentrate on one thing for too long.
- Have a leader (or someone who comes especially) to sit with or be near the child to help control and guide him/her. Individual attention is best.
- Use their energy for good in the club. Give them jobs like setting out chairs, cleaning boards etc.
- Set realistic boundaries of behaviour and make sure they know them. Don't allow them to overstep these boundaries. Reinforce them repeatedly.

(Tool Box: resource manual for children's work)



R. REMEMBER

- Ask other teachers for help and advice, including any school teachers in your congregation.
- Focus on 1 thing a week (don't try it all).

Finding joy:

- Smile
- Be enthusiastic
- Share your passion
- Enjoy the story
- Exude energy
- Always be ready to laugh

(Wilds McArver, p236)

“Love your students as children of God.
Affirm them, support them, pray for them,
pray with them and let the Spirit guide you.”

(Wilds McArver, p236)

“Discipline is an awesome task requiring wisdom,
imagination, patience, and great amounts of love.”

(Chapman and Campbell, p113)

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Thanks also to Andrew Edmondson, Scripture Union SA, for the use of his behaviour management workshop notes.

